

"Which Limb Do We Cut?"

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Under a \$2.1 billion budget approved Tuesday by the Montgomery County Board of Education, class sizes will increase slightly, some funding for extracurricular activities will be cut and the number of teachers in the county will decrease.

The approval of the somewhat undersized budget for the school system was mandated by the May 27 passing of the county's budget, which will help make up for a more than \$4 billion budget shortfall. Though the budget is \$160 million less than what the schools hoped for, it is still more than what many schools will be working with in the next year in efforts to solve a national economic crisis.

"This is close to catastrophic," school board Vice President Christopher Barclay said. "It's also something that we understand, that the reality of the county's finances is that we had to participate in reducing our expenditures this year."

Montgomery County Public Schools Superintendent Jerry Weast, who has been famously outspoken about his distaste for a smaller budget, said Tuesday that the budget is not what he wants, but it is something the schools will learn to afford considering all the factors that went into the council's decision.

The budget led to some tough decisions Tuesday for members of the Board of Education. The \$2.1 billion fiscal year 2011 operating budget is more than a 4 percent cut from last year's already reduced budget. Weast, when the budget was being decided last year, said the school system could not possibly run on any less, and now, they will be forced to.

"I hate to say this, but which limb do we cut off?" said one board member, Phil Kauffman. "I think it's something we have to do sooner rather than later."

School officials said keeping under the budget will mean eliminating 252 teaching positions (most of which would be new hires), increasing class sizes by one student in almost every class in every grade and limiting elementary school extracurricular activities that keep students with working parents occupied after classes.

Weast promised to file a lawsuit against the county if the budget was passed as is, below the state-mandated maintenance-of-effort requirement, but the school system was able to obtain a \$37.7 million waiver from the state and avoid a \$51 million penalty for violating the penalty. Weast has not formally filed a lawsuit yet but wants to remind the council that this budget also must factor in a substantial jump in county schools enrollment.

"You are going to have 2,800 more children and going to be spending \$1,000 less per child than you spent this year," Weast said about the school system, which typically earns a high national ranking. Schools close for the summer next Thursday, but Weast said he will

continue working and looking for any unused funds to repair the damage to programs affected by the new budget.